

## 1. What are the origins of the Cambridge School?

The existence of a “Cambridge School” was first identified by J. G. A. Pocock in the early 1970s, but the description was intended to refer to an approach to the history of ideas that began to achieve prominence in the 1960s. The practitioners whom Pocock had in mind as exemplary members of this School included himself, Quentin Skinner and John Dunn. Over time, it became clear that these three figures had distinct concerns in the fields of intellectual history and political theory. Pocock himself has tended to focus his research on the history of historiography, Skinner on the history of philosophy, and Dunn on political theory understood as a branch of historical inquiry. However, in the 1960s they shared much common ground. By the end of the decade, they had all contributed to methodological debates in the history of ideas. At the same time, each of them had made significant contributions to the study of the history of political thought itself: Pocock, the eldest of the three, had produced a major account of the ideology of ancient constitutionalism in seventeenth-century English political debate; Dunn had produced his classic treatment of the political thought of John Locke; and Skinner had published original studies of the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. What distinguished these works was their use of properly historical forms of investigation to explore the writings of past thinkers. This meant eschewing a range of historical fallacies: most importantly, anachronism, prolepsis, and teleology. It also entailed treating ideas as arguments rather than as disembodied entities. To understand the political positions advanced by canonical figures in the history of political ideas, it was argued, it is necessary to situate them in their original historical context.

If we want to discover the “origins” of the Cambridge School, it is important to recognise that the historical approach to intellectual history and political thought outlined above pre-dates the self-consciously programmatic interventions that came to be made in the late 1960s. To begin with, Pocock’s own *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* was published as early as 1957. It is also necessary to understand that the history of political thought was already variously taught and practiced at the University of Cambridge when Skinner and Dunn were undergraduate students there. Peter Laslett, who was producing innovative historical work on Filmer and Locke between the late 1940s and 1960, exercised a conspicuous influence on a succeeding generation of scholars – including Skinner, Dunn and Pocock (though Pocock himself was a decade older than Laslett). Similarly, Duncan Forbes, whose distinctive analysis of David Hume’s political ideas, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics*, did not appear until 1975, began working on political thought at Cambridge shortly after his arrival in 1947. Over the course of his career there, he either taught or directly influenced, among others, John Burrow, Skinner, and Dunn, covering topics ranging from the Scottish Enlightenment to Hegel. Finally, Pocock had been supervised in the 1950s by Herbert Butterfield, whose interests included intellectual history, and whose antipathy to the British brand of national teleology (which he dubbed the “Whig” interpretation of history) acted as a warning to subsequent intellectual historians. The 1970s saw a great flowering of the Cambridge approach: Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment* appeared in 1975, Skinner’s *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* in 1978, Donal Winch’s *Adam Smith’s Politics* in the same year, while Skinner’s student, Richard Tuck, published *Natural Rights Theories* in 1979. Yet all of these

works in some measure look back to some of the examples set by Butterfield, Forbes and Laslett.

Having established this genealogy, it is worth noting the fact that one thing that distinguishes Pocock, Skinner and Dunn from their predecessors was a determination, at least in the 1960s and 1970s, to justify their procedures in terms of self-conscious methodology. It was above all Skinner who made this terrain his own. This involved coopting a range of philosophical insights as a way of lending clarity and rigour to the common-sense historical view that past thought was best interpreted by contextualizing its arguments. These insights were for the most part derived from Anglophone schools of philosophy, with R. G. Collingwood, Willard Van Orman Quine, Tomas Kuhn and J. L. Austin exercising a particular influence on Skinner.

Subsequent Cambridge School historians have tended simply to practice their trade instead of reflecting in any detail on how they might justify their activity in terms of larger methodological considerations. Richard Tuck, Istvan Hont, Gareth Stedman Jones and Anthony Pagden have all produced major interventions in their respective fields, yet philosophical analysis of their historiographical practice has formed at most a rather marginal part of their activities. Nonetheless, it seems right to stress that Skinner's contributions to methodological debates helped give prominence to the Cambridge approach to political ideas within the field of the humanities more generally.

## **2. How does the Cambridge School differ from previous approaches to the study of the history of political thought?**

Intellectual history along with the history of political ideas enjoyed a place in the academic culture of the west throughout the twentieth century. From this perspective the Cambridge School was a latecomer to the field. Yet advocates of the Cambridge approach have sharply distinguished themselves from their predecessors. This claim to distinction has largely been based on the fact that Cambridge intellectual historians have treated their subject as they would any subject of historical inquiry: that is, by approaching their object of study impartially, rather than as an occasion for moral exhortation; marshalling the full range of evidence; engaging in critical source study; rejecting anachronism; and avoiding teleology. This thoroughgoing historicism might usefully be contrasted with two other approaches that dominated the landscape before the advent of the Cambridge School: the abstract analysis of past ideas disconnected from their historical context, and the normative evaluation of bygone thinkers as a supplement to political philosophy.

The first of these approaches grew out of the German idealist tradition of philosophy as it developed between Hegel and Dilthey, finding expression in the twentieth century in the work of figures like Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Cassirer. Similar strands of thinking can be found in Britain and the US, most of them derived from earlier German scholarship: Irving Babbitt, Arthur Lovejoy, Jacques Barzun and Isaiah Berlin variously exhibited a range of idealist traits, the most common of which was the tendency to view ideas as independent agents that moved through time independently of their social and political causation. This style of history might thus be described as fundamentally unhistorical, although there is no doubting that many of its practitioners produced major works of scholarship.

Alongside idealist intellectual history, political ideas have also been studied in the west as a base from which to endorse particular systems of value, treated with philosophical partisanship rather than historical impartiality. In the United States, the

most celebrated exponent of this approach to political ideas was Leo Strauss, who inspired generations of followers to examine the canon of past political philosophy in terms of a contrast between ancient political values that were found commendable and forms modern relativism that he believed ought to be rejected. The object of Strauss's study was philosophy rather than "mere" thought, despite the fact that his academic base was inside a political science department. Thus, prior to the Cambridge School, the history of ideas was commonly studied in philosophy, literature and political science departments, rather than specifically by historians. In the 1960s, under the influence of the progeny of Laslett and Forbes in the UK, and in the work of figures like Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood in the US, the ground shifted. The history of political ideas now became a prominent concern for historians themselves, transforming the discipline of the history of political thought.

### **3. What are the main lines of divergence between members of the Cambridge School?**

It follows that members of the Cambridge School share the prejudices of historians in approaching past political ideas. Thus, in principle at least, an aversion to anachronism and teleology is common ground between them. Beyond that, there is a range of divergences between their work. Some of these differences have already been canvassed: Pocock was largely interested in the history of historical understanding, Skinner in the history of philosophy, while Dunn came to prioritize political theory over historical research. At the same time, Cambridge historians have also focused on distinct topics and periods: Pocock on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Burrow on the nineteenth century, Winch on economic ideas from Adam Smith to the twentieth century, Skinner on the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, Dunn most consistently on the thought of John Locke, Hont on political economy between William Petty and Karl Marx, Tuck on natural jurisprudence between Grotius and Kant, Stedman Jones on social thought in the long nineteenth century.

It is also important to note that these figures pursued their research with different questions in mind, giving rise to different political concerns. For this reason, the Cambridge School cannot reasonably be described as advancing a coherent political programme as such. This divergence in political agenda became more conspicuous in the 1980s when Skinner began to focus more intensely on a particular ideology whose principles he sought to endorse. This was the ideology of republicanism, which Skinner himself has tended to describe as a "neo-Roman" style of thought. Thus the Cambridge School, united on broad methodological principles, whether tacitly or explicitly, has tended to divide in its commitment to the doctrine of republicanism, with subtle, if often trenchant, differences of perspective being advocated by Pocock, Skinner, Dunn, Hont and Tuck.

### **4. Does the Cambridge School advance a method or a doctrine?**

For this reason, although the Cambridge School can reasonably be seen as united in terms of a shared historical "method", its members are divided in their commitment to the ideology of republicanism. Yet it is important to emphasise, as already indicated, that Cambridge historians, while they can conveniently be described as adherents of an identifiable method, have for the most part avoided making contributions to philosophical debates about how to proceed. As we have seen, the exception again here is Skinner. In a series of highly influential essays published between the late

1960s and the mid-1970s, he articulated a philosophical defence of the historical approach to political ideas. We have already noted that this defence was based on principles shared across the historical profession. We have also drawn attention to the fact that this historicism was elucidated with the aid of strands of thought derived from Anglophone philosophy. We might usefully set out Skinner's use of two philosophers in particular. The first is the Oxford-based idealist philosopher and historian, R. G. Collingwood. While Skinner rejected Collingwood's view that the historian should aim to "re-enact" the thought of past thinkers, on the grounds that the actual thought itself was not accessible in any immediate sense, he nonetheless held fast to the aim of reconstructing past ideas by means of historical interpretation. This would result, Skinner believed, this time following Collingwood, in an appreciation of the radical historicity of past philosophy.

The question that remained was how one could most faithfully access past thought. For Skinner this could best be achieved by recovering what thinkers were *doing* in advancing their claims. Viewing past arguments in these terms was to understand them, in the language of ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin, as "speech acts". What the historian sought to retrieve from the past was the character of intellectual "interventions" rather than ideal meanings. Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* should therefore be regarded in this sense as forms of action in the world – as pieces of argumentative advocacy rather than ideal theories. The best way of making sense of their advocacy, Skinner went on, was by collecting information that would help illuminate their intentions. In other words, the historian could best recover meaning by interpreting arguments in their original contexts.

Skinner's particular means of vindicating the project of understanding ideas in their contexts may not have generated unanimous consent among Cambridge historians of ideas. For example, Pocock has tended to view "discourses" as operating independently of the individual intentions or speech acts which must, from Skinner's perspective, constitute them. Yet broadly speaking historians in the field have tended to accept that it is their business to interpret the intentions of past authors by situating them in their relevant milieux.

There has nonetheless been some debate about what constitutes relevant context. Skinner and his students have tended to emphasise the intellectual context of past thinkers. So too have Pocock, Hont and Tuck. More recently, the case has been put for exploring wider social and political contexts. This goal has been pursued in my own *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke*, and, at least in principle, the potential relevance of contexts beyond purely intellectual ones is widely accepted. This underlines the ongoing commitment to historicism on the part of the Cambridge School. Yet this commitment has exposed the Cambridge approach to philosophical criticism.

## **5. Does the Cambridge School's focus on the history of ideas risk reducing political thought to its historicity?**

This is a question-begging question: why should there be a problem with the historicity of thought, or even with the historicity of values? Yet it is a question that has been provoked by Cambridge historians themselves. In recovering various doctrines from the past, students of political thought have never been fully satisfied with justifying their relevance in terms of their simple historical interest. Dunn,

having begun his career underlining the purely historical significance of Locke, steadily came to emphasise his ongoing, “living” appeal. Most explicitly, Tuck has tended to present his work as philosophy by other means, using historical reconstruction to “clarify” contemporary thought. At the same time, while Skinner has maintained his commitment to the historical-rootedness of past thinkers, he has also launched a plea for the ongoing relevance of republican values as these were promoted between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. Yet it is clear that, on purely historicist principles, this appeal to the current value of ideas in the past can only be normatively prescriptive in nature. At this point, therefore, history blends into philosophy, and the philosophical enterprise itself is forced to dispense with rigorously historical judgement: historical values are taken to have prescriptive force irrespective of their specifically historical viability. It therefore transpires that, as a mode of political thought, the most prominent strands of thinking within the Cambridge School tend to abandon historicity in favour of moral exhortation. It follows that the Cambridge School does not have a problem with historicity as such: rather, its members experience difficulty in reconciling their normative intuitions with an account of the trajectory of modern history.

## **6. What books would you recommend for Iranian Students to get familiar with Cambridge School?**

Most of the texts that should be recommended to students interested in the Cambridge approach to the history of political thought have already been mentioned. The place to start is Skinner’s 1969 article on “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in *History and Theory*, 8: 1 (1969), pp. 3–53. Also essential is Skinner’s *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 2 vols. Perhaps the most famous study in the history of political thought is J. G. A. Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Another classic study is John Dunn’s *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). Among the next generation of Cambridge School historians, Richard Tuck’s *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Istvan Hont’s *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) stand out in a large literature. Something of the range of publications available from the generation of scholars below Tuck and Hont can be gleaned from the following list: David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Annabel Brett, *Liberty, Right and Nature: Individual Rights in later Scholastic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2015), Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Liberal Imperialism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2005). The Cambridge School now flourishes far away from Cambridge: throughout the UK (especially in London), in the United States, and in parts of Europe, with burgeoning interest in Latin America and the Far East. Debate about the relationship between history and philosophy continues, with historians tending to emphasise the contingency of past values while sects of philosophers contend for the timeless appeal of fundamental norms.

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